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of the
Revolution

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HISTORY No. 1

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A Soldier's Christmas at Morristown in 1799

1941

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, HAROLD L. ICKES, *Secretary*

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, NEWTON B. DRURY, *Director*

Reconstruction of Continental Army hospital hut built in the winter of 1779 in what now is Morristown National Historical Park, N. J. Fires on the earthen floor provided the only heat. Smoke escaped through the wooden vents in the roof.

Winter Encampments of the American Revolution[1]

By Elbert Cox

When Mr. Cox wrote the article which follows he was Superintendent of Morristown National Historical Park, N. J. He was transferred later to the Superintendency of Colonial National Historical Park, Va.

THE long periods of winter encampments have received little consideration in narrative histories of the American Revolution. Emphasis has been given to accounts of maneuvers and battles, with attention to the success or failure of the army and its officers in this phase of operations. Of the long months of forced inactivity in general military operations, only a sketchy story of the personal privations and sufferings of the soldiers has been written.

A thorough examination of contemporary accounts gives to the winter encampment a much greater significance in the complete history of the Revolution. In fact, the task of keeping the Continental Army together during a winter encampment may not have been less difficult than leading them through a summer campaign. Certainly an army has to live through the winter before it can fight in the summer. It may be suggestive of the point to cite a modern situation—the feeling of relief that a clear day brings to Civilian Conservation Corps commanding officers after inclement weather has held the boys idle for a week.

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[1] Reprinted from *The Regional Review* (National Park Service, Region One, Richmond, Va.), Vol. I, No. 2, August 1938, pp. 3–7.

In two separate winters Washington brought the major portion of his army to Morristown, N. J., for cantonment. The first time, in 1777, sheer exhaustion after his surprising successes at Trenton and Morristown forced a halt to his activities. The second time, in 1779–1780, Morristown offered peculiar advantages in location which Washington was quick to see. Safe from attack because of the natural barrier furnished by the Watchung Mountains, he still could watch the British Army in New York. The chains of mountains stretching to the north toward West Point and south to Philadelphia also gave assurance that supplies of food, clothing, and military equipment were reasonably secure from attack and that lines of communication to the north and south could be kept open.

The severity of the winters and the hardships of the men at Morristown are fully recorded. Of the extreme cold in 1779 Washington wrote from Morristown on March 18: "The oldest people now living in this country do not remember so hard a winter as the one we are now emerging from." The scarcity of supplies became so acute as to threaten all efforts to keep the army together. The men were led, out of their own distress, to forage for themselves. In consideration of these depredations, Washington wrote to the magistrates of New Jersey that "For a fortnight past the troops, both officers and men, have been almost perishing for want. They have been alternately without bread or meat the whole time."

An account by one of the soldiers after his arrival in camp in 1779 is no less enlightening:

> It was cold and snowy, we had to march all day through the snow and at night take up our lodgings in some wood, where, after shovelling away the snow, we used to pitch three or four tents facing each other, and then join in making a fire in the centre. Sometimes we could procure an armful of buckwheat straw to lie upon, which was deemed a luxury. Provisions, as usual, took up but a small part of our time, though much of our thoughts.

A log hut was a luxury after a few weeks of living under those conditions. Though serious, and keenly appreciated by Washington, the privations of the men were only one of many problems. There was ever the need for recruiting, outfitting, and drilling new enlistments to take the place of those whose terms were up or who left of their own accord. Washington's appraisal of this problem is given in his letter of January 22, 1777, to the President of Congress.

> We have a very little time to do a very great work in, the arranging, providing for, and disciplining a hundred and odd Battalions, is not to be accomplished in a day; nor is it to be done at all with any degree of propriety, when we have once entered upon the active part of the campaign; these duties must be branched out, or they will be neglected and the Public Injured. [There was extreme need for men] for if our new Army are not ready to take the Field early in the Spring, we shall loose all the advantages, which I may say, we have providentially gained this winter.

The business of running an army was no small undertaking even for the few thousand men that Washington had. The recruiting of additional regiments must be accompanied by the appointment of new officers, and the Continental Congress proved often to be more whimsical than wise in its actions. Washington wrote letter after letter patiently explaining why one candidate should not be advanced over another. Deserved recognition for his experienced officers gave him much concern as witness his letter of March 6, 1777, to Richard Henry Lee, inquiring into the cause for the nonpromotion of Benedict Arnold.

He recommended a "plan . . . for the arrangement and future Regulation of the General Hospital" and finally won its approval by the Continental Congress. Smallpox became so prevalent during the winter of 1777 that inoculation was a necessity. Attention had to be given also to the problem of suitable clothing, arms, and ammunition for the troops. After much pleading by the Commander in Chief, the Continental Congress resolved to establish "Magazines, Labora-

Washington spent the Christmas season of 1779 in this mansion which is preserved today in Morristown National Historical Park.

tories and Foundries" in the State of Pennsylvania and in New England.

With all these details to manage, Washington still kept keen watch upon the British to anticipate their projected movements in the coming summer (he had guessed the general plan of their campaign for the summer of 1777 as early as February of that year). He lost no opportunity to harass and annoy them upon all occasions by removing out of their reach "all the horses, waggons and fat cattle" as the best mode "of distressing the Enemy and rendering their Situation still more disagreeable." Of similar intent was the plan to have Lord Stirling attack Staten Island by crossing on the ice from the Jersey shore.

He complained that more time to "the military parts of my duty" was not possible because of "the infinity of perplexing business," and the "multiplicity of letters and papers I have to read and consider . . ." These ranged from an order respecting the "Colour of Horses"—the white or gray ones were too conspicuous for reconnoitering—to letters of petitions for appointments, pensions, or pay.

Yet not every hour of the day was given to stern duty. Numerous balls were held at which the officers and their wives or sweethearts were in attendance. Washington and his Lady were frequently among the participants. A lighter side of the General's nature is revealed by Mrs. Martha Daingerfield Bland, wife of Colonel Theoderick Bland of Virginia, in a letter to his sister-in-law, Frances Bland Randolph, describing her visit in Morristown.

> We visit them twice or three times a week by particular invitation—Ev'ry day frequently from Inclination. he is generally busy in the forenoon—but from dinner till night he is free for all company. His worthy Lady seems to be in perfect felicity while she is by the side of her Old Man as she calls him. We often make partys on Horse Back the Gen[l] his lady; Miss Livingstone, & his aid de Camps . . . at which time General Washington throws off the Hero and takes on the chatty agreeable com-

panion—he can be downright impudent sometimes—such impudence, Fanny, as you and I like . . .

It is to be assumed that diversions could be found also by the men in the line. In reality their personal letters suggest that human nature, even of the soldier, has not changed from that day to this. Two examples, one to illustrate the "seamy" side, and another the comic, may be taken as typical. First, there is the case of the one who had been impressed into duty as regimental clothier. He described his predicament in a letter to his brother:

If you was just now to step into my Hutt . . . You'll find me sitting on a chest, in the Centre of six or eight taylors, with my Book, Pen & Ink on one side and the Buttons & thread on the other—the Taylor you'll find some a Cutting out others sewing, outside of the taylors you will see maybie half Dozen men naked as Lazarus, begging for cloathing, on the floor you'll find it about knee deep with snips of cloth & Dirt. If you stay any time you'll hear every Minute knock-knock at the door & I calling walk in, others going out, which makes a Continual Bussle—Presently I begin to Swear . . .

But to prove the eternal buoyancy of the human soul consider this soldier's account of how he spent his time:

During these operation, we were encamped at a place called the Short-hills. While lying here, I came near taking another final discharge from the army in consequence of my indiscretion and levity. I was one day upon a camp guard; we kept our guard in the fields, and to defend us from the night dew, we laid down under some trees which stood upon the brink of a very deep gully; the sides and tops of the banks of this gully were covered with walnut or hickory saplings, three, four, or five inches diameter at their butts, and many of them were fifty or sixty feet in height. In the morning before the guard was relieved, some of the men (and I among the rest, to be sure, I was never far away when such kind of business was going forward) took it into our heads to divert ourselves by climbing these trees as high as they would bear us, and then swinging off our feet, the weight would bring us by a gentle flight to the ground, when the tree would resume its former position. After exercising ourselves some time at this diversion, I thought I would have one capital swing; accordingly, I climbed one of the tallest trees that stood directly on the verge of the gully, and swung off over the gully; when the tree had bent

to about an horizontal position it snapped off as short as a pipestem; I suppose I was nearly or quite forty feet from the ground, from which distance I came feet foremost to the ground at quick time; the ground was soft, being loamy and entirely free from stones, so that it did me but little hurt, but I held the part of the tree I had broken off firmly in my grasp, and when I struck the ground with my feet, I brought it with all the force of my weight and its own directly upon the top of my unthinking skull, which knocked me as stiff as a ringbolt. It was several minutes before I recovered recollection enough to know or remember what I had been about, but I weathered the point, although it gave me a severe headache for several days afterwards, as a memento to keep upon the ground, and not to attempt to act the part of a flying squirrel.

The story of the winter encampment in the Revolution is the theme for the development of Morristown National Historical Park, a unit of the system of national parks, monuments, and historic sites which are preserved and maintained for the American people by the National Park Service of the United States Department of the Interior. The three separate areas which comprise the park contain historic objects and remains connected with each encampment. The preservation and restoration of historic buildings, the construction of sample log huts, and the use of modern museum methods are combined to supplement existing information and to stimulate the imagination of the visitor. Washington's Headquarters, reconstructed Fort Nonsense, and the many features in Jockey Hollow form a link with the past by which he can obtain a better understanding and appreciation for the story of the American Revolution.

A Soldier's Christmas at Morristown in 1779[1]

By Russell Baker, Junior Historical Technician, Morristown National Historical Park, N. J.

"HALF rations again! By Christmas we'll be on no rations at all!"

—And when we came to Morristown they told us the people were all in sympathy with the cause; very few Tories among them, and that this was a land of plenty.

"Yes, plenty of cold and snow Sam, if this cold continues there won't be one of us left to live in these damned log huts. Why did General Washington pick such a place for our winter encampment?"

—Washington knows what he's doing, Henry. We're safe from attack here at Morristown. The British can never get over the mountains east of here. I, for one, am willing to go any place Washington says; I'm willing to suffer along with the rest, but I've stood all any human being can stand. We've been for weeks on half rations; half-naked and not enough blankets to go around, and the coldest winter of the century. If we could only get more grog, that would keep out the cold.

"I haven't had a drink of grog for days. The only way we can keep warm is in building these huts. When do you think we'll be in our hut, Sam? This tent is as good as nothing at all."

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[1] Reprinted from *The Regional Review* (National Park Service, Region One, Richmond, Va.), Vol. III, No. 6, December 1939, pp. 3–7.

The luckier Revolutionary soldiers were living in huts like the one reconstructed above, but many of their comrades still were in tents when Christmas came to Morristown in 1779.

—About 3 days more. Perhaps we can make it by Christmas, then we'll celebrate in our new log mansion. But Captain Ashmead won't be in his hut by Christmas. He says he'll see all the privates under cover first.

"I heard that General Greene is attempting to get most of the officers in private homes, but is meeting with great opposition. No one wants an officer in their home, I guess, because they're afraid the British will attack most any day and burn their place down. If the British do get through, we certainly can't offer much resistance."

—Sam, some of the other boys ate a good meal last night—even had a chicken. What do you say we do the same tonight? Down this road, not very far, lives a farmer by the name of Wick. His yard is full of chickens and his barn is overflowing with grain—more than he and his family can ever use.

"Wick's farm![1] That's where General St. Clair is staying. If he ever caught us there we'd be up for court-martial in the morning."

—I'd take a good lashing for a square meal. Anyway we deserve something to eat for Christmas, and we may not get caught.

"But haven't you heard General Washington's orders. No more of this pillaging, he says, and calls us a band of robbers rather than disciplined troops."

—That's easy for the General to say, but does he understand what we are going through out here?

"They say he is going to visit camp tomorrow. Let's wait. Perhaps he'll bring us some news—news that the French fleet is going to arrive, or that we can borrow some of the 5,000 barrels of flour collected for the French to use when they come. Then at least our bellies will be full on Christmas."

★ ★ ★

This imaginary conversation between two Continental soldiers encamped in Jockey Hollow, near Morristown, N. J.,

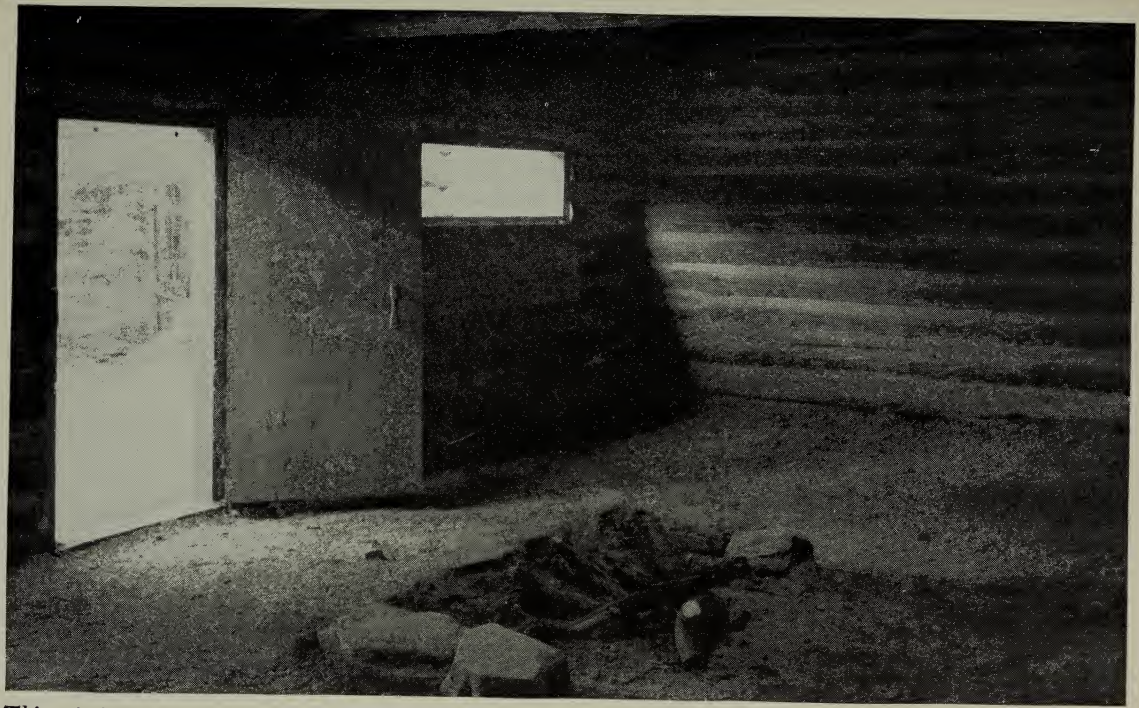
was probably typical of hundreds of others which took place during the memorable Christmas season of 1779. Both from a military and a political standpoint, the winter was an extremely critical period. Soldiers were compelled to live on half and sometimes quarter rations, which made it impossible for Washington to prevent pillaging and marauding. An attempt on his part to prevent ruthless stealing of supplies from the farmers in the vicinity caused a complete famine in camp, making it necessary to order regular foraging and marauding expeditions which went from house to house and took everything not absolutely essential to the inhabitants.[2]

Christmas of 1779 found the ragged, half-starved men of the Continental Army busily engaged in building crude log huts, which were to be their homes until the opening of the next year's campaign. Just before Christmas there began the extreme cold which was to characterize the winter of 1779–80, the worst of the century. Some of the men were under cover by Christmas, but others still were in the open two weeks later when a sudden blizzard brought a 5-foot snow blanket to most of New Jersey, and froze the Hudson and other rivers solid.

Most of the officers were even worse off than the ordinary privates, yet had to wait until all the men were under cover before beginning construction of their own quarters. Quartermaster General Greene attempted to obtain quarters for the officers in private homes, but found that the people offered determined resistance to the idea. Greene appealed to the civil magistrates for help, but their sympathies were with the populace. Exhausted in his patience in providing what he deemed absolute necessities for the officers, he finally appealed to Washington. Washington then threatened to obtain accommodations for his officers by the exercise of martial law, if necessary, but he never carried out his threat.

The following letter, written by Brigadier General Samuel

Reconstructed officers' hut at Morristown.



This primitive heating system was all that warmed soldier patients in the hospital hut during one of the severest winters of the century. The interior is one of the Morristown reconstructions.

H. Parsons, Connecticut Line, to General Greene, illustrates the difficulties encountered in housing even general officers:

> Dear Sir: I beg you to order me a large markee and a stove as the last resort I have to cover me; I cannot stay in this Trophet a day longer nor can I find a House without going four miles from camp into which I can put my Head. The Room I now have is not more than Eight feet square for six of us; and the family worse than the Devil; and the Justices threatening you and me if I continue to occupy this Hutt.
>
> I beg you not to fail to send me the Markee and Stove to Day; or send me somebody to drive away the Evil Spirits who inhabit this House.
>
> Your Obedt Servt
> Samuel H. Parsons

What did the Continental soldier eat for his Christmas dinner? While we have no record of any special food's being rationed for the day, the following general order illustrates the kind of food he must have had—perhaps only a half or even a quarter of the prescribed ration:

> A pnd. of hard or soft bread & 19 Pound of Indn. Meal or a pound of flower, a pound of Beef or 14 oz. Pork to be daily Ration untill further orders.[3]

Some of the officers, at least, were able to escape the hard times prevalent about the camp on Christmas Day. A letter written by Lieutenant Erkuries Beatty, of Hand's Brigade, illustrates a celebration in splendid style:

> Camp near Morristown
> Christmas Day
> Dec.r 25th [17] 79.
>
> . . . I am just done dinner about half Drunk, all dined together upon good roast & boiled, but in a Cold Tent, however grog enough will keep out cold . . . tomorrow we all dine at or with the Colonel, which will be another excellent dinner and I think you may call that fine living, but oh! I am afraid it won't last many Days—we hutt about four miles from Morristown . . . in about one week we will be in our hutt & a fine lay out it is . . .[4]

Even the Commander in Chief, living at the Ford Mansion in Morristown throughout this Christmas season of 1779,

could not have been very comfortable. The official family was much crowded even though most of the spacious mansion was placed at its disposal. As late as January 22, 1780, Washington wrote:

> . . . I have been at my prest. quarters since the 1st day of Decr. and have not a Kitchen to cook a Dinner in, altho' the Logs have been put together some considerable time by my own Guard; nor is there a place at this moment in which a servant can lodge with the smallest degree of comfort. Eighteen belonging to my family and all Mrs. Fords, are crowded together in her Kitchen and scarce one of them able to speak for the colds they have caught . . .[5]

Besides the dearth of personal comforts, this Christmas was one of the most disheartening of the entire 8 years of the war. Up until November, high hopes had been held that the powerful French fleet under Count D'Estaing, which was operating in the West Indies, could arrive on the coast in time to cooperate with the Continental Army in a siege of New York City. But D'Estaing failed to grasp the opportunity and chose instead to assist General Lincoln in an unsuccessful attack on Savannah, Ga. Thus, at Christmas time, Washington found it necessary to weaken his own force to give assistance to the defeated Lincoln. Besides this, Washington and his staff became alarmed at the indications of a possible attack by Sir Henry Clinton, the British commander at New York. Clinton had called in all his outlying detachments and had the entire army concentrated on Manhattan Island. Preparations were being made to embark a large fleet, which, Washington thought, may have been a feint for an attack on Morristown. Not to be caught unawares in such a situation, Washington gave orders to place all the troops in a position to defend themselves. A system of alarm signals was organized, each brigade being directed to its proper place in the line of battle, and Duportail, chief of the engineers, and General Greene were instructed to prepare a plan for a defense of the position. Such an attack, however, never occurred.

George Washington's Christmas dinner of 1779 may have been cooked in this fireplace, preserved today in his headquarters mansion at Morristown.

Farmer Henry Wick, whose home (above) was the object of hungry soldiers' pilferings, provided quarters for General St. Clair.

Four days before Christmas, Washington wrote to Governor Livingston of New Jersey concerning his apprehensions in regard to the plans of the British. He wrote that Clinton could not be ignorant of the small number of men left in the Continental Army, the distress of the military magazines, and the want of forage. "The loss of our huts at this inclement season," he pointed out, "would be a most serious calamity. This loss would be accompanied by that of a great part of our baggage, and a number of our men by desertions."[6]

The general orders on Christmas Day, 1779, make no mention of the festiveness of the occasion, only the prosaic grind of military routine. One order dated December 24, 1779, calls for a court martial on December 25 at 10 o'clock in the morning, for a trial of the noncommissioned officers and privates who were in confinement.[7] Another announced that a small supply of shirts had arrived and would be delivered.[8] Still another, dated December 25, is a reprimand for the "shameful waste of forrage" in camp.[9]

But what must have added most to this disheartening Christmas season, at least to Washington, was the court martial of Benedict Arnold, who was tried for permitting a Tory vessel to enter the port of Philadelphia without acquainting other officials of the fact, and other charges. The trial was held in the old Dickerson Tavern in Morristown and the occasion made it one of the most important gatherings ever held in America up to that time. Arnold was summoned December 19[10], and further sessions were held at the same place at 11 o'clock on the mornings of December 24, 25, and 26[11]. Even on Christmas Day the trial continued! As evidence in his favor Arnold placed before the court complimentary letters from the Commander in Chief which bore out the fact that he was one of the bravest generals of the army. A sad Christmas, the first of many which Benedict

Arnold was to have! Sadder still it must have been to Washington who had put implicit faith in Arnold.

So, it may be wondered, could there have been a Christmas at Morristown in 1779? These "times that tried men's souls," as Thomas Paine wrote, were never more in evidence than during that season.

Today, 160 years later, when the ageless Christmas message is said and sung again to the sound of bells and the twinkle of candles, when the firelight burns brightly on twentieth century hearths, Americans still may keep green the story of Morristown's Christmas in 1779. For that story, in the great realities of the present, well may remind us of an ancient sacrifice whereby we now are afforded, as Scrooge's nephew said, "a good time, a kind forgiving, charitable, pleasant, time."

Notes

[1] The Wick House, as well as Washington's Headquarters (the Ford House) mentioned elsewhere in this article, are now units of Morristown National Historical Park.

[2] Letter from the Chevalier de la Luzerne, the French Minister, to his government, *New Materials for the History of the American Revolution* (John Durand, Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1889), pp. 217–218.

[3] General Orders, January 18, 1780, *Morristown Orderly Book*, Morristown National Historical Park manuscript collection.

[4] Written to his brother, Dr. Reading Beatty, "Letters of Four Beatty Brothers of the Continental Army, 1774–1794," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. XLIV (1920), pp. 193–263, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

[5] John C. Fitzpatrick, *Writings of Washington* (United States Government Printing Office, Washington, May 1937), Vol. 17, p. 432.

[6] *Ibid.*, 292.

[7] *Ibid.*, 309.

[8] *Ibid.*, 310.

[9] *Ibid.*, 320.

[10] *Ibid.*, 286.

[11] *Ibid.*, 302, 312.

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